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Information on Ethiopia Lacking

In past columns, I have reported on the fanaticism and savagery of Ethiopia's Marxist dictator, Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam, who has picked the country as clean as the bones of a slaughtered calf. He has diverted supplies to his army and has squandered money for political hoopla while his people starve.

Mengistu has blamed everyone except himself, particularly the United States, for the disaster he is presiding over. He has escaped the international reprehension he deserves, in part because he has been able to operate in the shadows. Neither news organizations nor intelligence agencies have been able to provide much reliable information on what's really happening in Ethiopia.

Even biographical details on Mengistu are sparse, beyond the obvious fact that he's diminutive (5 feet 4) and apparently a dedicated Marxist. U.S. intelligence profiles also agree that he is ruthless and humorless, that he probably has taken part personally in executions and that he has used chemical weapons against his own people.

I had my reporters Dale Van Atta and Scott Barrett review the best U.S. intelligence available on Ethiopia, a series of secret and top-secret CIA and Pentagon reports. The documents are full of caveats, with words like "probably" and "most likely" betraying how speculative the information is.

Three top-secret reports referred to particularly hot "intercepted messages," but they gave precious little hard data on what's really going on in Ethiopia. One report actually concluded with a paragraph on "rumors [that] are widespread in Addis Ababa."

The intelligence agencies know, in general, that Mengistu, like Josef Stalin 50 years earlier, has waged a disastrous, ideologically inflamed campaign against the productive farming techniques that might have reduced, if not prevented, the human cost of the current famine.

And the CIA has reported that "many peasants" have joined the Eritrean separatist rebellion, led at first by "landlords and former aristocrats," because they believe Mengistu's land-reform policies have jeopardized their livelihoods and their food supply.

But the CIA has little idea of how many people are fighting and dying in the Eritrean rebellion. One source said "several hundred thousand" a year; another guessed the figure was merely in the "thousands."

The intelligence reports agree that the rebellions in Eritrea and in Tigre provinces are costing the Mengistu government at least \$420 million a year.

The agencies also agree that the Eritreans are currently winning or holding their own, but that Mengistu, wary of a nationalist coup by fellow officers, has shown no sign of being open to negotiations.

The agencies cannot agree how much it cost Mengistu to celebrate his 10th year in power last September. Of course, any extravagance was unconscionable while his countrymen were dying a few hundred miles north of the celebrating capital.

Administration officials used the most extravagant intelligence estimates available and put the cost at \$150 million. An administration critic, using the same data, put the cost at \$25 million, much of which was paid for by the Soviet bloc.